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Anxiety, Politics and Critical Management Education

Russ Vince

Associate Dean, Research and Professor of Leadership and Change
The School of Management, University of Bath, Bath BA2 7AY
Email: r.vince@bath.ac.uk

Abstract

The focus of this paper is a discussion of anxiety and politics as they relate to Business School pedagogy. Using ideas from Critical Management Education (CME), the paper explores why and how to engage with the anxiety mobilised through attempts to learn. The aim is to discuss emotional and political dynamics that are generated, and too often avoided, in management education. Making these dynamics overt in the classroom can help managers to comprehend the political context within which management takes place. Examples informed by CME are presented, as well as reflections from the author on the anxiety and politics that emerge for the critical management educator in a Business School context. The contribution in the paper is to show the way that anxieties and politics within the Business School classroom offer opportunities to change how Business Schools approach the teaching of managers. CME adds value to management education because it challenges what and how individuals and groups expect to learn, and consequently it challenges assumptions about how learning takes place within Business Schools. Such challenges are seen as an important and integral part of 'making the Business School more critical'.

Keywords

Critical Management Education, Learning Inaction, Anxiety, Emotion and Politics

Introduction

In Business and Management Schools, there has been a tendency to see anxieties about teaching and learning as something to control, ignore or abandon. The assumption has been that the anxieties of learning in the classroom need to be reduced through very clear divisions between the roles of teacher (to control learning) and student (to comply with the teacher's control of learning). Mainstream teaching approaches are based on a simplistic division of power: the teacher knows, the student does not; the teacher speaks, the student listens; the teacher chooses what will be learned, the student complies (Freire, 1972). Students of management are also willing accomplices in these power relations. Attempts to bring critical approaches into teaching on mainstream management courses can provoke anxiety, and through this anxiety a retrenchment to methods that were consistent with students' sense of the 'contract' they had entered concerning what and how to learn (see Sinclair, 2007). Mainstream approaches offer a dependent model of learning. The danger in this for managers is that it reflects and helps to reinforce a dependent approach to leading, managing and being managed. Such dependency has led to the conclusion that courses like the Master of Business Administration (MBA) are considerably better at creating followers than leaders (Gabriel, 2005) and that they fail to develop leaders at all (Mintzberg, 2004).

Following on from previous work in this area that has considered critical approaches to learning (Willmott, 1997; Reynolds, 1998 and 1999a; Reynolds and Trehan, 2001); I explore the interplay between emotion and politics in CME. My argument is that we can engage with the anxiety that is inevitably mobilised through attempts to learn in order to understand different ways of working with management students and practitioners¹. We can work with and through anxiety to communicate the emotional and political complexities that are part of management roles. A particular contribution CME can make is to highlight ways in which responses to anxiety contribute to sustaining established inter-personal, organizational and social power relations. Such relations of power are reproduced and become visible within classroom settings, and the tutor is confronted with the question of whether to work with them or whether to avoid them. This mirrors a key problem faced by managers in practice, which is their tendency to avoid the anxieties and antagonisms generated within their work roles and identities, which then undermines the scope of action (Vince, 1991). Such avoidance places emotional and political limitations on understanding management roles, thereby restricting management practice.

In general terms, the assumption that motivates my own thinking and practice in 'making the Business School more critical' is the educational interest managers might

¹ A common understanding of anxiety is that it is fear without an object – we can't easily say what makes us anxious. Here, I am using the word in the sense of 'the expectation of a danger' – something to be avoided or controlled, because it 'incites the feeling of being uncomfortable' (Salecl, 2004). 'Being uncomfortable' is a state that promotes learning as much as (if not more than) preventing it.

have in the connection between emotion and politics² in organizations (Vince 2001 and 2004). This particularly concerns learning *how* organizations are emotional places (not how individuals within organizations can 'manage' emotion): how strategies and actions are subverted by unacknowledged emotions; how individuals and groups internalise and enact organizational dynamics; how links between individuals' behaviour and organizational structures are created and recreated; and how initiatives designed for change (or learning) come to represent or replicate existing anxieties, stuck relations, limited ways of working, or repressive/ regressive organizational culture and practice. In this paper, I discuss anxiety and politics as they relate to Business School pedagogy; I provide some examples from my own practice as a tutor with undergraduates and with MBA students to illustrate the points I make; I give some examples of positive and negative responses from MBA students to my practice; I reflect on my own anxieties produced by these responses, as well as the link to politics within the university; and I conclude with some general reflections on anxiety, politics and CME within Business Schools.

Emotion, Politics and Critical Management Education

The various possibilities and difficulties of bringing critical approaches into Business Schools have already been well explored and explained (for example: Reynolds, 1999b; Cunliffe, Forray and Knights, 2002; Grey, 2002; Antonacopoulou, 2002; Currie and Knights, 2003; Miller, Hagen and Johnson, 2003; Grey, 2004; Brocklehurst, Sturdy, Winstanley and Driver, 2007; Sinclair, 2007). The importance of critical perspectives has been in their ability to show that managers' capacity to reason is not solely concerned with efficiency and effectiveness, but also bound up with power, control and inequality (Fournier and Grey, 2000). Indeed, the concepts of efficiency and effectiveness are themselves embedded in power relations and inequality. CME has questioned mainstream assumptions about managers' learning, both in terms of the content and processes of management education (French and Grey, 1996). A key focus has been on ways in which management education reflects and reproduces the operation of power relations in work organizations (see for example: Reynolds and Trehan, 2001; Grey, 2004; Reynolds and Vince, 2004; Gherardi and Poggio, 2007).

The teaching and learning that takes place in Business Schools is never divorced from the complexities of self/other relations, business school power relations, and power relations more broadly within society. Existing literature from CME has provided some guiding ideas about the relationship between CME and Business Schools. First, it is important 'to consider the modes of domination that exist in our own institutions and our own classrooms' (Cunliffe, Forray and Knights, 2002, p. 489) if we are to be able to

² Politics is 'a term to describe the activity of individuals, groups, organizations or institutions in mobilising resources and enrolling people to support a policy, plan or project ... politics is a practice of securing compliance or consent ... politics might be the practice of resistance to the established power relations ... (or) it is just as likely to be a question of power struggles between different groups of managers' (Odihi and Knights, 2007, p. 336).

engage with managers in seeking improved understanding of power relations in organizations. Second, we need to accept 'that management is not about neutral techniques but about values' (Grey 2004, p. 180). CME reconfigures management education in terms of attention to values and to organizational context. This invites us to question the values and assumptions communicated implicitly and explicitly within Business Schools. Third, it is important to question the desirability and the possibility of control (Grey, 2004) and especially the ways in which control has come to define the role of 'teacher'. Finally, because CME seeks to communicate about power, values and control, it can speak clearly on the everyday experiences and political processes involved in practice (Antonacopoulou, 2006).

Critical approaches to management raise the possibility of undermining the conventional view of organizations 'as rationally ordered, appropriately structured, and emotion free life spaces, where the right decisions are made for the right reasons by the right people, in a reliable and predictable manner' (Kersten, 2001, p. 452). Studies that have been concerned specifically with the relationship between emotion and politics have shown that emotion is essential to control processes, and that emotions need to be understood in terms of the social and political structures of which they are a part (Fineman and Sturdy, 1999). Organizational power structures evolve in ways that can undermine the legitimacy of emotions that are not attached to an organization's vision, prompting the denial or reorganization of individual experience (Turnbull, 2002). Emotions underpin and influence behaviour in organizations in ways that create distinctive political dynamics and organizing processes (Vince, 2002). The generation of knowledge about the emotions and politics that underpin organizing adds to opportunities for behaviour that can 'unsettle conventional practices' (Cunliffe and Easterby-Smith, 2004). Emotion guides individuals in appraising social situations and responding to them, therefore emotional display is part of an inter-personal, meaning creating process (Antonacopoulou and Gabriel, 2001). These organizing processes connect to broader political relations, such as the engineering and marketing of corporate culture (Van Maanen and Kunda, 1989; Kunda, 1992) and gendered emotions in organizations (Reynolds and Trehan, 2001; Swan, 2005; Lewis and Simpson, 2007).

In this paper, an interest in emotion in organizations is not about understanding personal emotions, the development of emotional awareness, or acquiring 'emotional intelligence'. Rather, it is about the ways in which emotions that are individually felt and collectively produced and performed, interweave with political problems (for example, that what seems like collaboration to managers may feel like control to their staff). The complexity of relations that are mobilised by the interplay between emotions and politics create surprising, self-limiting, unexpected, uncomfortable, and unwanted structures for action. The contribution that I am making here is to be explicit about the link between emotion and politics in management education. Business Schools do not encourage reflection on the emotions and politics generated within the practice of management teaching and learning, or more generally within management practice.

There are certainly examples where espoused institutional values involve the expression of 'innovative approaches to management education', only to encounter the difficulty of sustaining and supporting such innovations within the institution (Herbert and Stenfors, 2007). In addition, there have been relatively few innovations in course structure and design to challenge and to change the MBA (see Gosling and Mintzberg, 2006), and if MBAs are better at creating followers than leaders (Gabriel, 2005), then they are failing to equip managers with knowledge of the complexities of leadership roles and relations (Raelin, 2003). A key problem is that anxiety as a reflection of institutional (not individual) resistance to learning is poorly understood. In part, organizational structures, as well as limitations and possibilities of behaviour, are shaped through the conscious and unconscious avoidance of anxiety. Defences against such emotions tend to diminish the likelihood of organizational objectives being achieved (Stein, 1996). In the next section of the paper I develop a distinction that might be helpful in understanding and analysing how emotions and politics inform as well as recreate each other within organizations and in learning groups.

Learning Inaction

In order to begin to illustrate what I am talking about, I want to introduce a simple distinction; one that explains why emotion and politics are integral to learning. In a recent paper, where I have been attempting to build a critical theory of action learning (Vince, 2008), I have made a distinction between 'learning-in-action' and 'learning inaction'. The phrase 'learning-in-action' represents the value of action learning, and much of what we know about the productive relationship between learning and practice. For example, we know that action learning can provide a generative learning model for improvements in practice. Membership of an action learning group can assist individuals in the development of strategic actions, which then can be tested and potentially transformed in practice (see Pedler, 2002). However, there is another dynamic that is having an effect on learning and the transformation of practice within action learning. I call this 'learning inaction' because participants in such learning groups also have (conscious and unconscious) knowledge, fantasies and perceptions about when it is emotionally and politically expedient to refrain from action, when to avoid collective action, and the organizational dynamics that underpin a failure or refusal to act. We often know what the political limits of learning are in our organizations without having to be told; we collude with others in order to create limitations on learning; and we are often aware of what is and is not going to be seen as a legitimate result of our attempts to learn. We know these things *at the same time* as we are engaged in learning activities and reflections in practice.

An Example of 'Learning Inaction'

I am facilitating an action learning group of eight pharmacists, who are part of a leadership development programme for pharmacists sponsored by the Royal Pharmaceutical Society of Great Britain (in Wales, UK). Leadership development

is seen as important for pharmacists at this time, when the role of pharmacists in the Health Service and the community is changing significantly. Increasingly, they have to manage a range of issues in addition to their traditional role of dispensing medicines. For example: the management of chronic conditions; reviews of the use of medicines; issues of medicines waste and storage; pharmacists' role in rural health, health preservation and wellbeing; and their role in helping to reduce admissions into primary care. As in many action learning groups, the participants are working on real work issues with a view to transforming their practice over time and through such transformation to better understand their roles as managers and leaders.

There are some particular anxieties that pharmacists bring into such a group. Chief amongst these is the idea that: 'pharmacists are amiable, we don't like conflict and therefore we don't deal with it immediately and let it get worse'. There are also some specific assumptions and attitudes that this group of pharmacists use to defend against their anxieties. One example is their use of the words 'human resources' (HR) as a focus of 'incompetence' and 'problems' within their work. In this action learning group, 'HR is a word we use to distance ourselves from people and their problems' (for example, high levels of staff sickness, inter-personal conflicts within pharmacy teams, and the difficulties of directly managing people). This is because: 'we don't go to HR with good things, you always go with a problem' and because 'I will go and get the HR opinion rather than doing something about it directly'. 'HR' serves both emotional and political purposes for this group of pharmacists. HR functions as 'somewhere to place blame' and 'to displace responsibility rather than dealing with it'; it also foregrounds an issue that this group of pharmacists brought with them into their learning about leadership; that they want to know how to do leadership, just as long as they do not have to be leaders.

In this group of pharmacists, 'learning inaction' (the organizational dynamics that underpin a failure to act) is constructed in part through the notion that human resources are the people who deal with the human conflicts that arise in the organization and pharmacists do not. 'Getting the HR opinion' is a way of avoiding taking decisions and 'HR' serves as a focus for blame when decisions are avoided. This group of pharmacists uses 'HR' in ways that allow them not to act in their leadership role. Such dynamics are not confined to action learning groups; they are also part of classroom learning. While this is an example from a specific professional group, any learning group of managers is likely to create implicit structures to defend against the anxieties that are integral to learning.

The idea that learning groups contain both learning-in-action and learning inaction; both the means to learn and the dynamics through which learning is restricted or controlled, can inform our approach to the organization of teaching and learning in Business Schools. (I discuss this in more detail later in the paper). However, in order to

understand more about the specific dynamics involved, I want to reflect in more detail on one aspect of 'learning inaction' – the effects of anxiety in both promoting and preventing learning, and the ways in which the desire to learn and to avoid learning are concurrent aspects of the political experience of management education both for individual learners and institutions of learning.

Anxiety and 'Learning Inaction'

Anxiety is an integral part of learning, whether in the role of tutor or student³. Most people feel nervous when presenting in front of groups of other people. Many academics (including myself) say that, even though they have been teaching or making presentations at conferences for many years, the anxiety of undertaking these activities does not go away. Also, it is important that such feelings do not go away, since they help to shape and to inform the authority of our role as academics and the insights and new knowledge we generate (Vince and Martin, 1993). Similarly, many students feel paralysed by anxieties about how they will be viewed or judged if they speak in the classroom. However, where anxiety has been treated as both a topic and a resource for reflection in management education there have been benefits to students (see Knights and Willmott, 1999). A key characteristic of anxiety (in the context of teaching and learning) is that it has both paralysing and productive effects. Anxieties about performing in public are the very feelings that make such actions possible or impossible. Anxiety can provide the energy necessary to risk performing in public, as well as underpinning the fear and desire to avoid such performance. In the classroom, the anxieties of tutors discourage risks. Where such risks are taken, the resulting anxieties of students often reinforce tutors' original feelings of reticence about doing things 'differently'. I have written before about the cycles of learning that emerge from anxiety, one that can lead towards insight, the other that encourages 'willing ignorance' (Vince and Martin, 1993 and Vince, 1998). In addition I have discussed these cycles in relation to organizational learning, showing how managers' anxieties about being 'seen' in the organization link to an organizational process of restricted reflection and communication (Vince, 2004). This makes a link between anxiety experienced as individuals and anxieties that emerge through collective engagement. Anxiety is not only seen as coming from the self, but also from self/ other relations; not only from the internal impact of emotion, but also from the interplay between emotion and politics.

If we reflect for a moment on the anxiety that is being produced in Business Schools, it is easy to see that anxiety is a major output of the process of management education. For example: tutors are anxious to get good evaluations from students; students are anxious to get the best possible mark while drawing the least possible attention to themselves; the Business School contains the collective anxieties implied in learning contracts and includes fears about (e.g.) litigation, future recruitment and position in the market.

³ I am speaking here of anxiety not as a clinical term, but as 'a primary aspect of human experience' (Salecl, 2004).

There are anxieties about the administration of courses; about conforming to the stated learning outcomes; about the equal treatment of students; and about the extent of plagiarism. Of course, these anxieties are not unique to Business Schools for they reflect wider issues of organizational learning and change, but they tend to surface when expectations are challenged. For example, anxiety tends to arise when expected ways of teaching are not adhered to, when student participation as opposed to passivity is sought, and when the content or method does not seem immediately to connect with the subject at hand. This is a reflection of assumptions about specific roles and the expected self/other relations that emerge from such roles (e.g. the teacher talks, the student listens). The productive effects of anxiety will be seen in our ability to create different relations of authority within management education and thereby to create new ways for managers to understand authority in practice.

An important starting point in relation to anxiety and management education may be to recognise that 'what really produces anxiety is the attempt to get rid of it' (Salecl, 2004). This process can be seen within individuals, in groups and in organizations. For example, consider the white manager who is reluctant to provide feedback on work performance with a black member of staff because he is anxious of being accused of racism. The manager's anxiety has already produced the discrimination he was seeking to avoid. Think of the MBA group that is anxious about the cultural and racial differences in the learning group. Their declaration that 'we are all equal in this group' makes difference almost impossible to talk about. Their anxiety reflects an unspoken awareness that differences are already making a difference in the group, and that it needs to protect itself from the imagined conflicts that might occur if this subject is spoken about. Organizations also produce anxiety in the attempt to avoid or to 'manage' it. For example, the anxiety about being publicly blamed for failure, created very cautious management behaviour in 'Fairness Borough Council' (see Vince and Saleem, 2004 for a more detailed discussion of this process). If I do not want failures to be my fault then they must belong to someone else, to other people or other parts of the organization where poor management, bad practice or bad attitudes (etc.) exist. Anxieties about being seen to fail create blame of 'the other' and such blame undermines the ability of people within the organization to communicate across sub-system boundaries. In this example, anxiety about problems of communication is reinforcing communication problems in the organization.

The idea of 'learning inaction' is significant because it implies that we know (consciously or unconsciously) when it is emotionally and politically expedient to interrupt action, to limit learning, or to repeat common practice. Organizational members are often 'aware' of the limitations of complex processes like learning, leadership and change in the face of organizational power relations. In order to give some further clarity to this notion, I have provided brief examples of the effects of anxiety on individual learners, learning groups and on the organization of learning. In the following section of the paper, I provide some examples from my own practice as a (critical) management teacher to

illustrate how to work with the interplay between anxiety and politics in classroom settings.

Developing CME in Practice through a focus on Anxiety and Politics

The examples that follow do not explain 'how to' create learning environments for engaging with emotion and politics; they describe how I have created such environments. I am therefore adding my own voice, experience and reflections to the growing literature that demonstrates an interest in methods, approaches and strategies to being 'more critical' within Business and Management Schools. This literature includes for example, feminist approaches to teaching leadership (Gherardi and Poggio, 2007); experiential approaches to the MBA (Hyde, 2007); activity theory in management education (Gold et al, 2007); aesthetics in teaching organization studies (Strati, 2007; Welsh et al, 2007); education for ecology (Reason, 2007); and 'disorder' in the classroom (Thompson and Lamping, 2007).

Emotion and Politics in the Lecture Theatre

In this first example, I am trying to show how I engage with emotion and politics given the persistent requirement to work with large undergraduate classes and the physical constraints of the lecture theatre (Example 1).

Example 1

My lecture lasted for fifty minutes. When the students came into the lecture theatre I gave them each one sheet of blank A4 paper. After they had settled down, I gave them ten minutes to 'create something beautiful'. The students interpreted this task in many ways. For example, after a few minutes, a paper aeroplane starts to float across the lecture theatre. Some students sat with the sheet of paper in their hands, unclear what they were supposed to be doing. From the front I could see the students drawing, colouring with different pens, tearing shapes into the paper, folding it, screwing it into a ball, talking about other things, sending text messages and making origami figures.

When the ten minutes was over, the ways students responded to the task could be used to illustrate some very common aspects of human behaviour in organizations. The behaviour that results from being asked to do a task, however well or ill-defined it is, is likely to be varied. There will be, for example: predictable responses (paper aeroplanes); ambivalent responses (sending text messages); creative responses (elaborate colour pictures); and inquiring responses (talking with others to clarify or criticise the point of the task). There are many different interpretations possible of the things we are asked to do in organizations, as well as fantasies and expectations concerning what may be the 'right' and 'wrong' ways to do them. In addition, the exercise gave me the opportunity to openly question my interpretation of what is and is not predictable, ambivalent, creative and inquiring. This exercise helped some management students to understand that managing and being managed involve,

for example, complicated relationships, varied interpretations, limited resources and unclear commands. The exercise confused other students who did not understand what I was doing or why. The exercise gave me 'here and now' evidence that allowed me to illustrate some of the ways in which people behave in relation to organizational tasks. It also allowed me to discuss student responses ranging from excitement to confusion in order to show both the legitimacy and importance of such varied reactions in relation to 'how we do things here'. Finally, it provided an opportunity for me to emphasise the reflexive nature of the exercise; raising my position and power in the room as part of understanding the experience and relating it to management and organization.

Anxiety is integral to such an exercise. Even before it has begun I am still asking myself whether it might not be easier and less stressful to lecture to the group. When it has begun there remains a feeling of uncertainty for all about what might happen (tutor) and why we are being asked to do such a strange thing (students). It is difficult to hang on to the point of the exercise in the face of the feelings that are mobilised by it. However, this is the point of doing it, to be able to reflect on anxieties in a way that relates them to experience within organizations. The anxiety of not knowing or not being clear about what is expected is a very common organizational experience. Highlighting it in a classroom setting offers the opportunity to discuss the relational and political dynamics that underpin such experience. For example, when one doesn't know what is expected, it becomes important to ask, interpret or experiment, which is not always easy to do. Expectations are built in the relationship between managers and managed, they might reflect the difficulty that powerful individuals have in delegating authority, or conversely that people within positions of authority can feel out of their depth. The exercise introduces the importance of reflection in the midst of action or incomprehension; it asks students (and the tutor) to reflect on the consequences of their reactions; and it provides an opportunity to raise and discuss the politics of action and inaction.

Emotion and Politics as a Challenge to Expectations on the MBA

In my second and third examples, I describe my learning approach within the MBA programme, where there is more freedom to experiment within a less restrictive physical space and which has a smaller number of students, who tend to be more openly concerned with ensuring that they get 'value for money'.

Example 2

The 'whole group exercise' is designed explicitly to help managers to engage with the emotional and political dynamics that construct and often constrain organization. The exercise belongs to the 'group relations' or 'systems psychodynamics' tradition of experiential learning (French and Vince, 1999). In the MBA I am normally working with groups of around 30 managers, in a room

where the chairs can be arranged in a circle. I run the exercise for seventy-five minutes and then have a short break before a sixty-minute plenary to debrief the event. At the start of the exercise, I will say something like: 'This session is called the whole-group task. It will finish at (I give the group the finish time). The task is for the group to decide, and the management of the task is with the group. Your tutor will be commenting only on the process'. The first thing that happens, as soon as I have finished making this initial statement, is some form of reaction to not having a clearly defined task. Some people express this through their silence; others, through attempts to take control (for example: 'I'll write the ideas on the flip-chart'); through offering traditional or predictable solutions ('let's vote on it'); similarly, people decide that smaller groups would be easier or better; that a chairperson or leader would help to manage the group more effectively; that we should all go round and each say our idea for a task; that it is all a waste of time; that we should go for a walk; that that tutor is a... While you can say that such behaviour is predictable (some, if not most, of these things happen every time I run the exercise), it is also different every time; made distinctive by the particular combination of individuals that make up 'the whole group' and the varying organizational contexts involved. It is an exercise that is aimed at revealing the emotional and political 'dynamics' of the group, and how these create structures for action and inaction.

The exercise raises a number of issues that are important to an understanding of behaviour in organizations. The person who jumps up to stand at the flip chart and write down the group members' ideas for a task is behaving in this way in order to alleviate her/his own anxieties as much as to help with the effective management of a group task. Similarly, splitting into smaller groups helps group members to dispel some of the uncomfortable feelings generated by such a task. Finding a task is, of course, not the main point of this exercise. The 'whole group exercise' is a method for exploring the complex interplay of emotions, relations and politics on organization, as well as understanding the implications of organizational dynamics for leadership and change. The exercise is intended to reveal how quickly (and unconsciously) implicit rules and expectations are brought into groups; it shows (amongst other things) how difficult it is to break free from 'the way we do things here'; and how readily individuals abandon their authority when faced with uncertainty.

In the 'whole group exercise' the students feel anxiety very directly; they imagine that they have been abandoned by their tutor and they are unsure how to cope with the emotions that are generated by the group in response to 'not having a task'. The group then creates and stages a familiar story – based on the idea that 'good practice' (i.e. other things that they have done before in groups to try to control unwanted emotions) will assist in the discovery of a task. The anxieties in the group are immediately present, as this is not a familiar learning method for MBA students. Participants in this exercise find themselves having to question established relations in the room as the tutor is not

behaving 'as expected', thereby calling into question what might be the role of student in the exercise. This is further complicated by anxieties that arise as the exercise confronts institutional expectation and practice concerning both the nature of the contract between tutor and student and the ways in which expert knowledge 'should be' communicated. There is often an assumption that such methods are designed to provoke anxiety, which is not at all the case. These methods are designed to reveal the existing anxieties that individuals bring into groups; the anxieties that are collectively mobilised through group behaviour; the ways in which anxieties assist in the creation of organizational structures through which to manage the event; and the way that such anxieties are quickly covered up through the use of organizational habits and routines. This is another example of how anxiety is produced through the attempt to get rid of it (Salecl, 2004). It is the participants' (doomed) attempts to 'manage out' the anxieties that sustain the anxiety throughout the exercise.

In addition to the anxieties, fantasies and differences that arise within a group, similar emotions and power relations emerge between groups.

Example 3

When I start working with groups of MBA students I quite often ask them to organize themselves into small groups so that they can discuss and reflect on content together, or work on specific tasks. The process of getting themselves into groups is often interesting in terms of the choices (and the lack of choices) that are made. However, I also ask students to reflect on the speed with which their descriptions about their own small group are institutionalised *in relation* to the other small groups in the classroom. Once small groups have formed, I ask them to give themselves a name and an identity (I do not specify what I mean by identity). They spend the time carefully and carelessly working out the best name for themselves; and they often highlight particular aspects of their identity – that they are a group where all are equal, a group with a shared interest, a diverse group, a positive group, etc. I then ask them to say how they as a group are different from the other groups in the room. The results of this request are not surprising, since I have explicitly asked them to pinpoint differences. However, groups very easily develop strong convictions and beliefs about their own labels and interpretations of the differences between 'us' and the 'other' groups. I have found that this exercise is useful in showing how quickly political relations are created and mobilised between sub-groups from emotional responses to 'other'; to protect the distinctiveness that 'we' have made; and to provide an example of why it is often difficult within organizations to communicate or move between sub-system boundaries.

In the inter-group exercise, the fantasy of consensus in 'our group' is unstable enough to need to be reinforced through suspicion of others located outside of my group. The students' anxieties about the group to which they belong are not voiced, and it is this

that helps to make the other groups so different from 'our group'. When (and if) anxieties and antagonisms within are acknowledged, then the group can begin to see the emotional and political dynamics they have created and start to 'see things differently'. In part, the force with which 'other' groups are constructed as different, comes from the anxiety about unexplored differences within 'my' group. The inter-group exercise is designed to show how anxieties about being in a group are projected onto other groups; to make conflict an external rather than internal issue for the group. This has political consequences for inter-group behaviour because our assumptions and fantasies about 'other' groups within an organization create limits on our ability to communicate with them.

These examples highlight three different versions of 'learning inaction' that were constructed in Business School learning groups. In the first example, inaction was built from the anxiety of not knowing what to do or what was expected. It emerged from the very difference that a different method of learning can expose. Anxiety undermined the possibility of reflection on our reactions and responses to different ways of working or learning. In the second example, inaction was constructed not only from the different method, but also from a group's attempt to control or get rid of anxiety using habitual reactions and responses. In addition, anxiety was generated through an overt change in the behaviour of the tutor, the imagined and/or actual source of control. In this exercise, anxiety undermined reflection on the structures that were being created in the group in order to avoid having to think of new or different ways of working together on a task. In the third example, inaction was constructed through feelings of anxiety in relation to others, both outside and within 'my' group. Reinforcing difference in other groups means that we do not need to examine differences here. In this exercise, anxiety undermined reflection on the internal dynamics of a learning group, as well as what needs to happen to enable communication across sub-group boundaries. All of these exercises reveal students' responses to the anxiety of learning, as well as the collective dynamics that might structure limits to learning within that particular learning group. 'Learning inaction' will be formed in different groups of students in different ways, depending on the focus of an exercise and the people involved. My argument is that the anxiety and politics that promote 'learning inaction' are an integral part of learning groups.

Reflections on my own anxieties and the politics of teaching MBA students

At this point in the paper I reflect on the anxieties and politics that have been generated for me in my role as teacher. I do this in relation to one of the examples I have given, the 'whole group exercise', using the anonymous feedback sheets that the MBA students complete after each module. Through my reflections I am trying to illustrate the tensions apparent in teaching and learning methods that seek to engage with anxiety and with the politics of management learning. In September 2007 I ran the 'whole group exercise' with an MBA group (29 participants) who were very positive about the approach and its impact on their learning. The feedback sheets for example said:

‘excellent, very powerful, relevant and impactful’ and ‘a very different teaching style which took some adjusting to. Once I got it, I found the unit fascinating and (it) ... really got me thinking about how I approach many aspects of my life and work. For me, the MBA should include far more of this type of learning experience’.

In February 2008 I ran the ‘whole group exercise’ with another group of MBA students (31 participants). This time the students’ reviews were different. There was little neutrality within this group of students about the exercise. Students either liked the module (the minority) or hated it (the majority). There were positive reviews (‘an excellent two days, challenging and worthwhile’). However, the negative reviews did not feel good. For example, one student reacted strongly in his or her subsequent course feedback to my thoughts on the power relations and inter-personal dynamics between different cultural sub-groups within the ‘whole group exercise’ (as well as to my overall approach):

(This module) ‘...has been less than useful. First the lecturer's delivery of the module ... left me in the dark as to his purpose and that of the module. Much more disturbing though is the lecture's disturbing racial slurs during afternoon of the 2nd day... There is a clear difference between diversity and inequality, some of the comments he made in class were completely unacceptable’.

The feedback from another student captured a wider feeling of frustration and dissatisfaction within the learning group – that I should have employed the group’s usual learning style:

‘I felt that the group task session raised the stress level of some students to the point where they were not thinking clearly and were unable to reflect on their experience - it was too intense an emotional experience. This might have been forestalled had the introductory remarks to the session included an explanation that it was expected that people would find this an uncomfortable experience and that they should reflect on this while devising and carrying out the task. Our group appears to have a preferred learning style of being taught in a conventional lecture style and then discussing it in small groups, which has worked very successfully in other modules’.

Some of the students on this module had strong opinions about my capabilities as a tutor. I was: ‘unprofessional’, ‘incompetent’, ‘a disappointment’, and ‘unsupportive’. While such responses did produce feelings of anxiety within me (what did I do wrong, how can I do it better next time, should there be a next time, etc.) I also understand students’ feedback as a continuation of the anxiety that was generated within the learning group in response to being asked to learn in this way. This anxiety is reflected back onto the tutor within the post-module evaluations as a way of avoiding collective dynamics within the MBA group, expelling an uncomfortable experience, and as a way of placing the fault back with the individual responsible.

Managers often experience this dynamic within leadership roles where their actions have been less than successful in producing desired outcomes. Calling the competence of leaders into question is an integral part of dealing with the anxieties associated with being part of something that has 'failed'. While I am certainly using the benefit of hindsight with my current reflections, the reactions I received are unlikely to prevent me from working in this way with future MBA students. My decision to focus on the 'here and now' dynamics of MBA groups seems to me to generate practical and real examples of the ways in which groups of people behave in organizations. For me, this offers students a way of understanding the organizational dynamics that are mobilised around both my and their attempts to lead and/or mislead within the group. Students' resistance to the way I mobilise my values and bias about how and what to learn is as important as their acquiescence with these values, because it mirrors organizational politics.

My approach is trying to raise an important question (over and above the question of my individual competence), which is: can a learning group engage with the inaction that is mobilised in response to addressing emotion and politics in the classroom in order to learn from it? This question is not just about managers' individual learning, it is connected to the context within which their learning takes place. It is not only the students' responses to (my individual and/or our collective) failure that are anxiety provoking, it is also the political consequences of such failure within the university that might underpin 'learning inaction'.

The politics surrounding the MBA are various. The MBA generates substantial income and it is important that the School retains its profile as part of the 'top-one-hundred'. Not everyone involved in the MBA approves of my teaching in this way, which is at times seen as typical of the 'touchy-feely' Organization Behaviour (OB) group, or, as one of the reviewers of the paper called it, 'ubiquitous OB gamesmanship'. All this means that I have to work hard to contain anxiety within difficult learning environments (not just in the classroom); to explain myself within an organization that is at the same time both accepting and hostile to my approach; and to openly question my assumptions and actions in choosing to work in this way.

I do not object to this work or the anxiety it generates because I think that it is important to be accountable for the risks, choices and decisions we make, whether in the role of teacher or manager. The anxieties, power relations and organizational consequences of such public accountability help managers to reflect, act on and learn about the complex human and political issues that their decisions generate. However, there are various organizational dynamics within Business Schools that underpin a failure to act. For example, my fear is that I will become isolated by using this approach, that I will become disconnected from the support of my colleagues. Students' inaction comes from (e.g.) the fear of the conflicts (and therefore the politics) that can arise from working together as a learning group. In particular, these fears relate to differences of

culture, race and gender; and towards the emotional energy that might be needed to work through difference. Inaction in the Business School context comes more from *indifference* towards creating opportunities to learn about the learning group. Both the advantage and the difficulty with CME is that it produces learning experiences from 'heaven' and from 'hell' (Sinclair, 2007). In contrast with approaches that are standardised and predictable, CME is not likely to produce the same learning outcomes each time it is done. If we are going to help management students understand, for example, how organizations are emotional and political places; how actions are subverted by unacknowledged emotions; and how initiatives designed for change reproduce static relations or reinforce control, then the question addressed by this special issue remains a fundamental challenge – how do we make the Business School more critical?

Conclusions: 'Making the Business School More Critical'

I have made a number of connected points about the relationship between anxiety, politics and CME in this paper. First, anxiety is seen as something to be expelled from management education, from organizations, from Business Schools. However, anxiety has productive as well as paralysing effects on both individual and organizational learning. Second, anxiety is connected to politics, since efforts to get rid of anxiety in organizations can produce further anxiety, which reinforces the avoidance of conflict and difference. Individual avoidance becomes caught up with organizational politics and power relations, forming managerial avoidance strategies within the organization that then shape individual feelings, behaviour and (in)actions. Reflecting on the anxieties present in attempts to learn provides an environment for understanding how anxiety and politics are linked in organizations. In the same way that anxiety underpins students' avoidance of learning, anxiety also underpins political avoidance strategies in management practice. Third, learning is simultaneously both desired and avoided in organizations and in Business School classrooms. At the same time that 'learning-in-action' makes a contribution to the transformation of practice; 'learning inaction' reinforces implicit limits to learning.

I have illustrated these points with examples from my own practice as a critical management educator. In three examples, I explore ways to address anxiety and politics as an integral part of learning about management. In my reflections on one of these exercises, I discuss the anxieties and politics generated for me, within an MBA group and within my own School of Management. In general, I am arguing that critical approaches to the education of managers can help us to reflect on our thinking and practice as teachers; on the broader pedagogical issues that arise from teaching managers; on emotions and politics within learning environments; and on the organizational issues emerging from a Business School context. The idea that a learning group or organization contains both the means to learn, and the dynamics through which learning is avoided, resisted, restricted or controlled, can inform our approach to

the organization of teaching and learning in Business Schools. The anxiety generated within the Business School classroom offers a starting point for change.

There are already many ways in which critical management educators can engage with anxiety and politics in their educational and development work with managers (see, for example, Cunliffe, 2009 as well as chapters in the following edited collections: Elliot and Turnbull, 2005; Rigg, Stewart and Trehan, 2006; Reynolds and Vince, 2007). However, there are some key points that emerge from the discussions in this paper concerning what critical management educators might achieve in working on anxiety and politics, as well as a broader question concerning the 'value added' of bringing such dynamics into management education.

The main reason for engaging with anxiety, and with the political relations associated with anxiety, is in order to change how, what and why managers learn. A deliberate shift from the use of mainstream methods and assumptions in management education can support a change in managers' understanding of power and authority. Managerial power relations, whether resistant or compliant, are reproduced in Business School classrooms. Avoiding engagement with these relations in the classroom removes the opportunity to reflect on them, and to find ways to understand how they connect to managers' everyday experiences within organizations. Exercises like the ones I have described, provide the opportunity to reflect on the complicated emotions and politics that managers are likely to encounter and manufacture in organizations. CME asks for a more intricate representation of organizational emotions and politics to be on view, one where it remains unclear the extent to which such exercises are at the same time both emancipating and controlling (both overtly and covertly). This suggests that, although CME will be done in many different ways, it is likely to draw attention to a tension inherent in teaching managers and in management practice. The 'radical potential' of CME to challenge ways of thinking and ways of working sits side-by-side with the 'political purpose' in educating managers to comply with organizational norms and expectations (Coopey, 2007).

In the early part of this paper I discussed four guiding ideas that inform our current knowledge of CME in Business Schools. To summarise, these are: questioning modes of domination in the classroom in order to reveal power relations that are part of managing/ management education; focusing on values rather than techniques, and the consequent need to address the context of managing/ management education; calling into question the desirability and possibility of control in managing/ management education; and emphasising the link between political processes within management education and the politics of management practice. I want to add a fifth idea to this list, which asks for a focus on the anxiety that is generated in management education, how this links to the politics of learning in groups, and how this interplay between anxiety and politics creates 'learning inaction' in managing/ management education.

The over-use of mainstream teaching approach in Business Schools creates 'learning inaction' because it legitimises opportunities to remain detached from the anxieties generated both in attempts to manage and to learn. CME may create 'learning inaction' for the opposite reason – because it rarely produces ambivalence and detachment. Using my MBA reviews as evidence, we can see that it generates (e.g.) anger and admiration, both of which can be problematic. Reflecting on my own and others' experience of teaching managers from a CME perspective, I think that CME is always likely to produce educational experiences both from 'heaven' and from 'hell' (Sinclair, 2007). The benefit of this is that it offers opportunities to question managers' thinking about the connection between learning, managing and organizing. Business Schools and managers have worked together to encourage a particular perspective on learning in organizations, one 'that promotes defensive attitudes, conservatism and destruction of all new ideas as potentially threatening and subversive' (Gabriel and Griffiths, 2002, p. 215). Making the Business School more critical involves making the political connection between management and learning more apparent.

Making politics more apparent in the Business School classroom involves another shift in managers' understanding – the shift from seeing themselves as facilitators of consensus or as arbiters of conflict. All of the exercises I have described are concerned with reflecting on the individual and collective consequences of anxiety; on relations within and between groups; on overt and covert groupings; on unconscious organizational dynamics; and on 'ways of doing things here' that remain unquestioned. In addition, the organizational behaviour emerging from participation or passivity in such events, offers opportunities for managers to identify individual, group and organizational practices of compliance or consent; to highlight resistance to expectations and decisions; or to reflect back on power struggles within the learning group.

Finally, I want to provide an answer to the question I posed earlier in this conclusion – what is the added value that CME can bring into Business Schools? CME adds value because it challenges what and how individuals and groups expect to learn, and consequently it is likely to challenge assumptions that reflect the purpose of learning within Business Schools and within organizations. Attempts to engage with emotions and politics in the classroom connect to the broader institutional context within which such relations and dynamics are created and maintained. Therefore, sustaining and developing CME practice in Business Schools is a contribution to making them more critical. Making Business Schools more critical contributes to understanding the complex emotional and political context within which management and organization take place. Management education that does not engage with the emotions and politics of being a manager reduces the potential for managers to learn and to be aware of how they, and the organizations they work in, create limits on learning.

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